INTO THE FRAY
Exodus 3:1-12
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Just when things had begun to look up: just when life had returned finally to an even keel; just when he had begun to enjoy security, safety, and stability, Moses felt himself propelled back into the fray.

It is one of the truly great stories of our civilization. It is about a series of events which happened back on the ragged edge of recorded history, about 3,500 years ago, which places it in a transition period between what we once learned to call the Iron and Bronze Ages.

Israel was not yet Israel but a number of robust, semitic families, descended from a wandering Aramaean by the name of Abraham and Sarah, his wife. When a famine struck several generations after Abraham, those families migrated south into Egypt where there was food. One of those semites, Joseph by name, had been sold into slavery in Egypt sometime before but had risen in the Pharoh's court and was a governmental official of some influence. So the Hebrews, as they were known, were welcomed in Egypt, and they settled in and prospered and grew.

When Joseph died, the Hebrews lost their friend in the court and suddenly this vigorous tribe began to look like a threat to the Egyptians, a potential fifth column. The welcome turned to suspicion: hospitality became resentment. Official governmental policy changed and became adverse to the Hebrews. Refugees became prisoners forced to work for their captors. They were treated harshly, persecuted, and oppressed. Still they prospered and grew.

The Pharoh decided that more drastic measures were required. Male Hebrew babies were to be thrown into the Nile River. The mother of one of those babies, in order to protect him, put him in a basket and hid him in a place where Pharoh's daughter would be sure to find him. When the young woman discovered the baby, she recognized him as a Hebrew, decided to save him and sent for a Hebrew woman to nurse him. The baby's mother, having anticipated this turn of events, happened to be nearby and was the one chosen to nurse and raise the infant. Thus, Moses, a Hebrew, grew up within the royal household of Egypt's monarch.

He too rose in prestige and position. His people, in the meantime, continued to grow in number and in strength and the Egyptians increased their oppression. One day Moses, a young man now, saw an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew worker. Moses became enraged, reacted vigorously, interceded and killed the Egyptian in the process. Unfortunately he was seen and, fearing for his life, immediately ran away, ending up in the wilderness of Midian frightened, tired, and very concerned, one assumes, about future prospects.

In a fortunate series of events Moses meets the daughters of a man of property, is given shelter, food, security. One of the daughters becomes his wife and Moses ends up in the employ of Jethro, his father-in-law. That's a remarkable pilgrimage: from political rabble rouser, murderer, outlaw, refugee on the lam, to middle-class respectability. The man we meet at the beginning of the third chapter of Exodus is almost audibly relieved...

"Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro..." You can almost hear the sigh of relief. He is safe, secure. I'll bet he was a member of Rotary, or at least the JayCees. I'll bet he had money in the bank and had begun to discuss educational trusts for his children. I'll bet he thought he had a "piece of the rock".

In the midst of that placid, peaceful scenario, God has a word to say. Out of the burning bush he calls Moses by name, tells Moses that he has heard the groaning of his people in Egypt, tells Moses that he has not only heard but intends to do something about it, says - in fact - "Come, I will send you to Pharoh, that you may bring forth my people."

I love that story for what it says about where God wants his people to be. I love it, as well, for the way Moses responds to this outlandish interruption to his peaceful new life. Moses says, in effect - "Who me?" His objections to God's preposterous proposal sound remarkably familiar. "Who shall I tell them is sending me? to which God responds with a not very clear "Tell them 'I am who I am' sent you." Moses counters, "They're not going to believe me when I tell them...and anyway, I'm a terrible public speaker."

God answers each objection, promises Moses that he will provide the necessary resources to get the job done, and assures him that he will not be abandoned.

And so, in a meeting that strikes me as terribly poignant, we overhear Moses meeting Jethro, his father-in law, who I envision as an elderly man, content now that his affairs are safely in the responsible hands of this strong young Hebrew, and telling him that he's actually going to leave this small paradise in Midian and return to Egypt - where he's still wanted for murder, to see whether his people are dead or alive. He's too modest or embarrassed to tell Jethro that he means to go back there and get the whole tribe of them out. And one of the greatest one liners in all of literature comes next as old Jethro, saying goodbye to his daughter and grandchildren looks Moses in the eye and says, "Go in peace."

If there's anything Moses is not "going in" for the next forty or fifty years - it's peace. He's going back to Egypt with a price on his head and his job is to convince the power brokers that it is in their interests voluntarily to give up the free labor they've been enjoying for all these years, to open the gates and escort thousands of people to the border and wave goodbye as they head toward some promised land at the end of the world North of Sinai. Peace is what you have in Midian, in the early morning, when the mist still clings to the tops of the little hills and the lambs are bleating for their mothers, and a clear stream bubbles by, and you have food enough and a stout stick and a strong arm and a family at home waiting for you. On the other hand, what you have when you've packed your belongings, saddled your ass and headed toward Egypt is fear, white-knuckled terror. And if you have any imagination at all you know that there isn't going to be peace, at least of the Midian variety, for a very long time, if ever.

Unless, of course, what you have in Midian isn't peace in the first place. That's what's going on in this story, of course: and it goes on consistently on every page of the Bible. The only peace worth having is back in the fray. Another way of saying that is that God called Moses back to Egypt not only for the liberation of the Hebrews, but also for his own salvation. Still another way of saying it is that your salvation comes to you in the form of a person who needs your love, a cause which requires your commitment, a Gospel which calls a deep and profound self-giving out of you.

The great temptation of the Christian Church, as it was for Moses, is to locate salvation in the peaceful wilderness of Midian: to withdraw, as it were, from the ambiguities of life in the world, to elegant sanctuaries where other-worldly platitudes assure the faithful of an other worldly paradise on the far side of the grave.

Christian social critic, Peter Berger, wrote that the "Function of religion in our society is to be socially irrelevant." [The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, p. 138] Berger went on to warn that powerful forces will stir in opposition whenever the church is relevant. "Stick to religion" the American Bishops will be told as they discuss their statement on nuclear weapons, as if the existence of life on the planet were not a theological issue. "Just preach the Gospel" the Utility will say to the religious coalition concerned about people who cannot afford heat: to which faithful people must say, if they value their integrity and their faith, "the existence of cold people is a religious concern."

There is something intrinsic about Christian faith which insists on its involvement in the world. Berger wrote: "The social relevance of the Christian community is not a political imperative, it is an imperative only of the Christian faith. And William Sloane Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, writes: "There is no way that Christianity can be spiritually redemptive without being socially responsible. A Christian cannot have a personal conversion experience without experiencing at the same time a change in social attitude." [Courage to Love, p. 32]

Historically Broad Street Presbyterian Church has reflected in its own life the traditional Presbyterian genius for keeping the two ideas of personal salvation and social justice in tension. It is easier, in institutional terms, to focus on one or the other. Neither a Neighborhood House which exists to help poor people, nor an evangelical church which exists to save individual souls, has a problem deciding what to do. But sometimes the church stumbles over its own objectives.

E. B. White said somewhere that it would be no problem to enjoy the world only - or to inform the world. Our trouble, he said, is that we wish to do both and that makes it difficult to know how to plan one's day. Christian people are called to do both: to love the world God has made and to save it.

It would be pleasant to invest our energies, skills and resources in the provision of good music, good worship, good education for ourselves. But our neighbors are hungry and cold and it is our perception of God's will that we

pay attention to both areas. And so we have a Mission Statement that says that we exist for our members and for the sake of our neighbors, and for the city, and for the nation, and ultimately in God's economy, for the sake of the world. And so, at this time, we are investing heavily and intend to invest more heavily in mission outside the four walls of this building. We are about to add a case worker to the staff of the church with the intent of helping, in a more creative and substantial way the individuals who look to us for help.

The point made by the Moses story, however, is that the need is not only the neighborhood's, but ours as well. People may, in fact, need the assistance this church can provide. But the soul of this church needs, every bit as urgently, to be engaged in meeting the complexities of the world at our doorstep. We are at our best, someone said, when we are God's love not only incarnate, but well organized.

Religious conversion, of course, is personal. It is a turning to Jesus Christ. And it is a simultaneous turning outward to the world, full of the love of Jesus Christ. Frederick Buechner in his autobiography, The Sacred Journey, describes how he finally learned that lesson. He was enjoying a very nice dinner with his mother in her New York apartment. A friend called from the airport. His family had been an a terrible automobile accident in California, he said. He wasn't sure they would live. Would Buechner mind coming to the airport to sit with him? Buechner hesitated, said he'd see if he could. The friend called back several minutes later to say that it wouldn't be necessary, that he had hold of himself. That uncomfortable event changed his life. Buechner reflects:

> "My mother's apartment by candlelight was haven and home and shelter from everything in the world that seemed dangerous and a threat to my peace. And my friend's broken voice on the phone was a voice calling me out into that dangerous world not simply for his sake, as I suddenly saw it, but also for my sake. The shattering revelation of that moment was that true peace, the high and bidding peace that passeth all understanding, is to be had not in retreat from the battle, but only in the thick of the battle. To journey for the sake of saving our own lives is little by little to cease to live in any sense that really matters..." (p. 107)

We have called this Dedication Sunday. It is the time when the members of this congregation put faith in a very tangible line, by pledging money to enable the mission of this church. May it be that and more this morning. May it be a personal acknowledgement that Jesus Christ calls this church and each one of us into the world.

Your salvation and mine is a matter of doing our living and believing in the middle of life, not withdrawing from it. Any peace we experience will probably be in the middle of some ambiguous, stress-filled situation which is demanding more than we think we have to give. The call of God to his church is to go "into the fray". That same call comes to each of us.

He has promised to provide what we need. He has promised to be with us, in the middle of it all. Amen.